



External Review of the IDRC Evaluation Unit

September 2010

This brief is based on the “Report on the 2010 External Review of the IDRC Evaluation Unit” by Ailish Byrne, Ian C. Davies and A.K. Shiva Kumar (with support by Adriana Gouvêa), and the “Evaluation Unit Report 2005-2010” by IDRC’s Evaluation Unit. Full reports are available from IDRC’s Policy and Planning Group.

1. Roles of the Evaluation Unit

The Evaluation Unit supports evaluation that is useful in promoting innovation and social change. The unit employs utilization-focused evaluation, which identifies intended use by intended users. A distinctive feature of the Evaluation Unit is that it both provides services within IDRC and funds research activities outside IDRC.

In its **internal service role**, the Unit provides technical support and capacity building to IDRC management and programs. The Evaluation Unit manages strategic evaluations and external reviews of IDRC programs; provides technical advice to IDRC staff, promotes organizational learning, and monitors the quality of project evaluations designed and led by IDRC programs.

The **programming role** supports evaluation, as well as capacity building and research on evaluation. During 2005-2010, the Evaluation Unit was responsible for an annual programming budget that ranged from \$800,000 to \$1.4 million per year. Since 2007, the unit also received \$100,000 per year to support capacity building with IDRC staff.

IDRC’s Evaluation Strategy 2005-2010 outlines four areas:

- Conducting strategic evaluations of IDRC's programming
- Evaluation capacity development with program staff and research partners
- Developing, adapting and testing evaluation tools and methods
- Supporting organizational learning for program effectiveness

2. Methodology

The external review includes two reports: one by the Evaluation Unit and one by an external panel of three independent experts. The first report outlines the IDRC Evaluation Strategy 2005-2010 and its evolution, the key research and evaluation findings, and major outcomes and lessons from the unit’s experiences. The second report assesses the implementation of the IDRC Evaluation Strategy 2005-2010; the quality of the work undertaken and research supported by the Evaluation Unit; the relevance, value and significance of the unit’s outcomes; and identified key issues for consideration by the Board of Governors.

The external review panel used a case-study approach and collected both qualitative and quantitative information through systematic document review, including 31 projects, and 37 semi-structured interviews with key respondents. Findings were triangulated for

reliability, organised according to the questions, analysed and, where applicable, assessed against the criteria given in the terms of reference for this review. The panel used expert opinion as a basis to arrive at its overall assessment and key observations.

3. Research and Evaluation Findings

The first report highlights six findings, based on their original or innovative nature, the significant level of effort or funding, and their strong connection to the Evaluation Strategy 2005-2010.

Evaluation field building in the global South is seen as constrained by weak capacity, narrow donor-driven agendas, fragmentation across agencies, and by the absence of citizen voice. IDRC brought together evaluation professionals to draw out insights into the state of evaluation supply and demand, as well as the opportunities and challenges for evaluation in the regions where IDRC works.

Complexity thinking, including the concepts of non-linearity and emergence, is considered relevant to the design and evaluation of development and development research. Evaluations should not automatically penalize programs for diverting from original plans; the achievement of original objectives might not be possible or desirable. Attribution is difficult to prove in complex systems; instead programs should document their contribution to outcomes.

The three largest **strategic evaluations** addressed capacity development, policy influence, and networks. The first report states that IDRC capacity development support focuses more on individuals than organizations, yet this support will not “trickle up” without deliberate interventions. Researchers should clarify their intent to influence policy and adjust to dynamic policy environments. IDRC has identified ways to support effective networks, including consideration of sustainability in terms of time, resources, and relevance.

Other findings relate to **outcome mapping, transitional justice and accountability**. Outcome Mapping measures changes in behaviour, actions and relationships of individuals or organizations, and was found to be a realistic alternative for planning, monitoring and evaluation. Theories of change in transitional justice, how societies come to terms with legacies of large-scale human rights abuse, were found to require more clarification and testing through rigorous evaluation that is both participatory and externally validated. Research organizations were found to face particular tensions in managing accountability as donors' demands may conflict with those of beneficiaries, as can the demands of different research users.

4. Review Findings

The review panel concluded that, overall, the Evaluation Unit implemented its strategy coherently and appropriately; undertook work and supported research of acceptable quality; and has provided information on outcomes that are significant, relevant and valuable.

The panel observed that the value and uniqueness of the Evaluation Unit and its work are widely recognised by partners, grantees and evaluators in the fields of development research and evaluation. The panel further stated that the Evaluation Unit made a sustained positive contribution to the public image and reputation of IDRC, both regarding the Centre's support for development research as well as its organizational effectiveness and the quality of its corporate governance.

4.1 Implementation of Evaluation Strategy

The review panel found that the Evaluation Unit implemented its intended strategy in a consistent manner, and that its processes of strategic decision making were systematic and sound. The main shift from the previous strategy (2000-2005) was a stronger focus on the development of evaluative thinking as a core process within IDRC. The unit progressively shifted its approach to capacity building, from providing direct training to instead identifying and supporting Southern practitioners of evaluation. There was a thoughtful and effective effort to develop networks and virtual learning communities. The review panel also noted the development of tools and methods to address issues of complexity in evaluation, as well as research-supported contributions to key debates in the global evaluation community on questions of impact measurement.

The Evaluation Unit fulfilled the roles it had set out for itself: contributing to IDRC accountability for the management of public funds; developing tools and methods to meet evaluation needs of IDRC and grantees; and supporting organizational learning and development through evaluation. Strategic evaluations were considered interesting and useful by IDRC program staff and management. With respect to accountability, the panel noted that there were significant variations within IDRC on how the role of the unit should be understood and what expectations should be attached to it. The review panel considers the internal provision of accountability information to be first and foremost a management responsibility.

Looking to the future, the review panel feels that the Evaluation Unit will need to put more emphasis on its ability to communicate effectively the broad, changing and innovative nature of its work both within IDRC and to external stakeholders. While striving to maintain a useful balance between its internal service and programming roles, the unit will depend on IDRC's ability to maintain the intellectual, creative and resource space that provides the foundation for many of the unit's achievements.

4.2 Quality of Work

The Evaluation Unit is open to a large repertoire of approaches and methods, especially those informed by complexity and nonlinear change, with a focus on capacity development, evaluative thinking and field building. The depth and quality of unit's publications and resources was confirmed by an extensive documentary review and by key informants within and outside IDRC.

Internal service role: Program staff value Evaluation Unit expertise in developing concepts and approaches, identifying external specialists, devising terms of reference and ensuring quality control. The shift to rolling Project Completion Reports (rPCRs) is

widely appreciated; however, questions were raised about what happens between rPCRs and whether they really foster evaluative thinking. The depth of Evaluation Unit thought and expertise was commendable in planning and facilitating the Annual Learning Forum, an event to share findings from revolving project completion reports (rPCRs). However, the panel found mixed perceptions about the value of the Forum, which alternated between IDRC-wide and the program level events in subsequent years. Some interviews suggested that the IDRC-wide learning forums were more useful.

The panel noted a marked improvement in the overall quality and presentation of the Annual Corporate Evaluation reports from 2005 to 2009. The reports were found to be useful in giving a sense of future direction and intended activities.

When different external reviews occur simultaneously, they consume great amounts of Evaluation Unit time, which accounts for spikes and dips in the availability of staff for other aspects of internal service.

The Corporate Assessment Framework, introduced in 2005, was initiated in response to the Board's interest in the question: to what extent and how effectively is IDRC fulfilling its corporate mandate? This framework had a mixed reception and was abandoned in 2009 as management did not find it useful or convincing.

Programming Role: The Evaluation Unit's publications and resources were found to be outstanding. The strategic evaluation findings drew particular praise, both within IDRC and outside. The unit makes a conscious effort to include Southern experience in their work, writings and priority setting. Southerner training opportunities and sponsored participation in regional and international gatherings are met with acclaim. The unit continually seeks to advance innovative evaluation methodologies and tools and is a recognized international leader in this field. Outcome Mapping remains the best known and the most closely associated with the unit. Training and the online learning community are flourishing, with diverse global case studies on the increase. But the Evaluation Unit's work is broader than just Outcome Mapping, which highlights the challenge of effectively communicating exactly what the unit does.

4.3 Outcomes

The Evaluation Unit highlighted five significant outcomes:

- evaluations integrate a deliberate utilization focus, and are being used in decision making;
- staff demonstrate evaluative thinking and a commitment to organizational learning;
- successful spread and devolution of Outcome Mapping to an ever-growing community of users;
- Southern-led evaluation practice and research to address knowledge gaps and development challenges in specific contexts;
- greater acceptance of use-oriented evaluation in the wider international development evaluation community.

The reviewers found the unit's contribution to these outcomes notable, especially given its small size and limited financial resources, as well as the complex and dynamic context in which it operates. The panel came to the following conclusions about these outcomes:

Use of Evaluation: The panel endorsed the general statement that evaluations are used at multiple levels within IDRC and that the Evaluation Unit has designed useful strategic evaluations. It also found evidence of the adoption of utilization-focused evaluation throughout IDRC's decentralized system. The unit has had a strong influence in building evaluation results into decision making within IDRC, particularly among management. However, the panel found it difficult to assess the extent to which evaluation has become more embedded within IDRC particularly over the past five years. The panel's assessment is that the strengthening of evaluation practices among grantees remains mixed.

Evaluative Thinking: IDRC staff are strongly committed to evaluative thinking and to organizational learning. Those interviewed regard the high degree of evaluation knowledge and expertise as a distinct feature of IDRC. The Evaluation Unit report stated that program effectiveness was attributed, in part, to improvements in evaluative thinking. Yet the review panel felt it could not determine such on the basis of the available definitions and evidence.

Outcome Mapping: The Evaluation Unit has been active in developing tools and methods appropriate to development research evaluation. It has produced several publications and case studies to highlight important methodological developments. Attention paid by the unit to disseminating and devolving Outcome Mapping resulted in its increased use by IDRC and by other organizations. While no longer a focus for the unit, the spread and uptake of Outcome Mapping continues through an online community of practitioners (www.outcomemapping.ca) that includes academics, NGOs, international agencies, and independent evaluators. The Evaluation Unit has broken new ground in methodology in recent years, yet struggles to communicate these efforts as IDRC has become identified primarily with Outcome Mapping.

Evaluation Field Building: In the panel's assessment, the Evaluation Unit is emerging as an important and innovative player in evaluation field building in the South. Many of those interviewed appreciate the unit's contribution, which is often characterized as respectful, low-key and significant. The unit's field building efforts in South Asia in response to new opportunities that have arisen in the region in recent years are particularly worth recognizing.

The Evaluation Community: The Evaluation Unit's work over the past five years has contributed to the broader evaluation community, through greater acceptance of, and advocacy for use-oriented evaluation in the wider international development evaluation community. Its efforts have resulted in greatly enhancing IDRC's reputation both in the field of evaluation as well as in the broader world of development research. A more systematic recording of the changes over time would help better assess the unit's contributions. The unit also contributes to enhancing the role and positioning of Southern

evaluators in development research evaluation. The panel agrees with the Evaluation Unit's claim of influencing donor evaluations systems and thinking.

5. Issues for Consideration

The panel identified two main issues for further consideration: first, IDRC's approach to accountability and second, the Evaluation Unit's work in the area of research and development.

Regarding the first issue, the panel concluded that the "management of public funds" role would benefit from more clarity from a corporate accountability perspective. In the panel's view, IDRC senior management and the Board consider accountability from two distinct yet related perspectives:

- One perspective is accountability for purposes of assurance (i.e., are IDRC's programmes and operations consistent with its mission and values, are policies and procedures followed, are risks identified, managed and mitigated, is the Board getting the information it requires to obtain assurance that things are under control and to fulfill its due diligence obligation?). In the view of the review panel, accountability for assurance purposes is best addressed by IDRC's internal control and audit function.
- The other perspective is of accountability for purposes of organisational learning and development (i.e. how do programmes, strategies and policies contribute to IDRC's mission and how could IDRC improve and progress?). In the view of the panel, this function is wholly consistent with the "organisational learning and development" role of the Evaluation Unit. The responsibility for providing evaluative information for learning rests with management for programme-based learning (with the support of the unit) and with the Evaluation Unit for strategic and corporate level learning.

Regarding the second issue, the review panel considers that IDRC faces a singular challenge: How to make sure that, within IDRC, the Evaluation Unit is supported in such a manner that, while fulfilling well its internal service and programming roles, the space and freedom it needs for innovation and risk-taking in the development of new evaluation tools and methods are protected.

The current public accountability paradigm creates severe limitations on reporting for organizations like IDRC: it imposes a simplistic accounting of the relationship between funds allocated and the achievement of "results". While there *are* significant results that can be attributed to the unit's activities, the sustainable research capacity building that IDRC supports requires a focus on process, perseverance, patience and a commitment to long-term engagement that sometimes makes this challenging. In the panel's view, the current approach to accountability is, in the best of circumstances, a well-intentioned but limited attempt to apprehend what are complex human interactions and interventions.

The review panel found that IDRC's Evaluation Unit took a leadership role and was instrumental in addressing this critical issue; perhaps no other significant international organisation had done so. The unit does breakthrough work in supporting the

development of performance management and accountability practises, as well as in research and development evaluation. The innovative nature of the unit's work together with its holistic, flexible, responsive and process-based approach, explain its effectiveness in developing the evaluation culture in IDRC and the global recognition it gets for the quality and usefulness of its evaluation work.

In the panel's view, the risk now is that the Evaluation Unit may become "a victim of its success". The unit is subject to ever-increasing demands both within IDRC and from partners, grantees and the broader evaluation community. If not dealt with in a clear and organised manner by IDRC, these pressures could progressively constrict the research space and intellectual freedom that have allowed the unit to nurture and produce the cutting-edge work that contributes so effectively to IDRC's mission.